

High Sierra

On the Road

For sheer jaw-dropping beauty, Mexico's Sierra Madre region is hard to beat. JOHN BENNETT went a-riding there and came back raving...

Story and photography by: JOHN BENNETT

THE Copper Canyon is one of Mexico's unique natural, cultural and historical wonders. North America's most traditional native Americans live high along the canyon's upper walls. Travel by burro train is still an everyday event. When the loads are too bulky or too heavy for the mules the Tarahumara Indians carry cornstalk bails, often weighing over 70kg, 30 miles a day – at a trot. These bails are used to feed livestock in Batopilas, a town at the bottom of the canyon.

Batopilas was the major destination on our off-road ride through Mexico. The journey to Batopilas is said to be the most spectacular drive in North America. The trip was organised and led by Skip Mascorro of Pancho Villa Moto Tours. Skip has been running motorcycle tours in the Americas for 15 years and has accumulated a wealth of experience of the people and the places to go. This was one of about 15 different trips Skip offers, ranging from touring trips using road bikes to off-road expeditions such as this one. The trips are carefully planned and then Skip steps back and lets his guests have the freedom they need to distil their own experiences.

Five other Australians and I flew to El Paso, Texas, where Skip had six Kawasaki KLR650s waiting for us at our motel. The rented bikes ranged from brand new to four years old and were all in excellent condition. We were joined by five American riders with their own bikes and Skip's two assistants; Ron Grover, an ex-Marine who was quartermaster and



always willing to help with any minor bike repairs; and Arturo Clave, who drove the back-up vehicle and made the local arrangements.

At our briefing that night, Skip stressed we were going on an expedition that required an attitude of teamwork and an understanding of the special nature of the journey. Flexibility is a must in Mexico, where unpredictability is a way of life. Due to the expeditionary nature of these tours each ride is unique and we were told to expect surprise routes. After crossing the border at Juarez, we spent our first night in the Mormon community of Nuevo Casas Grandes. We visited the Paquime ruins (900-1340AD), an ancient dwelling constructed of cast mud and *caliche*, plastered to a smooth finish and then painted white or decorated with coloured patterns.

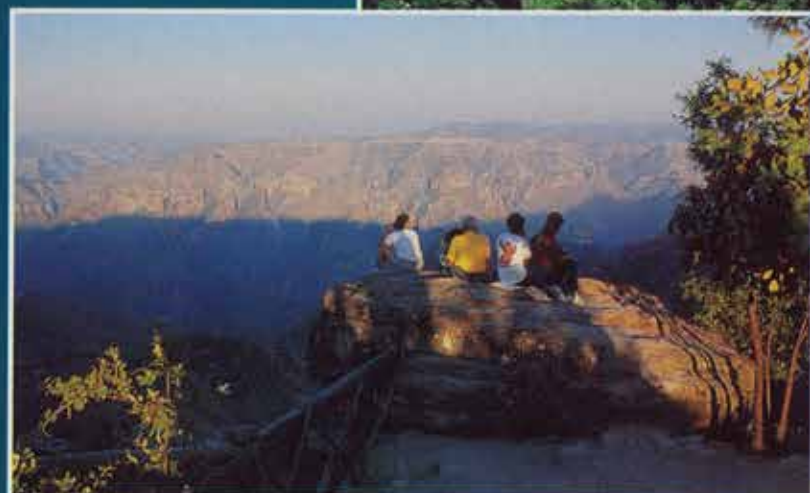
For a look at the decadent lifestyle of the rich and powerful during the last century, the second day we visited the Hacienda San Diego, a once elegant ranch complex belonging to the powerful dynasty of the Luis Terrazas family, a strong adversary of Pancho Villa in northern Mexico. We then took a detour up into the Sierra Madre mountains – new territory for Skip – got lost a few times but ultimately found our hotel at Madera around sunset after a very picturesque but dusty ride.

Our ride to the railway town of Creel was highlighted by a visit to the spectacular waterfalls of Basisiachic and then a dirt road which cut through some of the most beautiful mountain country imaginable. Creel is an old railroad town in the high pine country and was where we first encountered the Tarahumara Indians. We stayed in the Hotel La Posada de Creel, a quaint building with a central courtyard built right alongside the railroad tracks. That night we had a margarita party where we were entertained by the local band with guest appearances by our leader Skip and a few riders.

The next day we faced the breathtaking descent into one of the massive canyons that make up the sprawling 5000 square miles of the Sierra Tarahumara. This complex of canyons is, in fact, four times the size of the Grand Canyon in the USA. From a mountain setting at 8000 feet we dropped via a serpentine road to an altitude of about 1200 feet at the bottom of the canyon where the flora changed dramatically from wild rugged chaparral to desert thorn forest.

The town of Batopilas is a lost treasure of the Sierra Madre, an experience in Mexican history and traditional culture. It was built by the miners who sought silver there in the sixteenth century. The town's fortunes rose and fell with the production of silver and current political conditions. We visited the Hacienda de San Miguel

built by Alexander Shephard, a wealthy English mine owner on the other side of the river from the town. Walking among the ruins one could just imagine the pageantry and feel the grandeur of days past which must have been part of this desolate frontier post. Within the canyon depths the twilight surrenders



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as no-one knows when it was built or by whom. The stone ceiling arches three stories above the great empty chamber and apparently, the original carved oak doors were carried down from the mountains by mules.

After two nights in Batopilas we were ready to face the ride back up the canyon – a climb of nearly 7000 feet. In the shadow of the canyon walls the morning was cool as we ascended back to the pine trees amid fascinating rock formations in a territory inhabited by one of the most primitive Indian cultures, the Tarahumara.

On the way up, a near tragedy occurred when Arnie Postier, from Okalahoma City, lost control of his BMW R100 GS and just managed to jump clear and grab a tree branch as his bike slipped over the edge. Fortunately, a small tree snared the bike's handlebars about 20 feet down and stopped it sliding the remaining 300-400 feet down the side of the canyon.

It was so precariously lodged we could not even take off the panniers until help arrived. The only vehicle we saw all day – a truck full of locals – arrived an hour later and we hitched a long chain to the bike and hauled it back up with the truck. Luckily, the bike suffered only superficial damage, while the rider was shaken but not hurt.

We then travelled onto Guachochi, a rough mining town where we sampled a few *cantinas*. About 20 kilometres out of town, after passing through a few ranches, we found the look-out to the Sinforosa Canyon and saw the most rugged and spectacular view, with not a person in sight. By this stage we had been on the road for nearly a week and had hardly seen another tourist. With just a few words of Spanish on our part we found the locals very friendly and communicative, although

to a sky saturated with brilliant stars. Batopilas, another world from another time.

Batopilas is one of the most isolated towns on earth – no telephones, electricity for only three hours a day by generator and very little available to buy. By decree of the town no alcohol was sold. We took in our own food supplies, and all our meals were cooked by a lovely woman, Donna Michel, and served on her closed verandah.

The next day we rode down the canyon to Satevo where we visited a very imposing church known as 'The Lost Cathedral'

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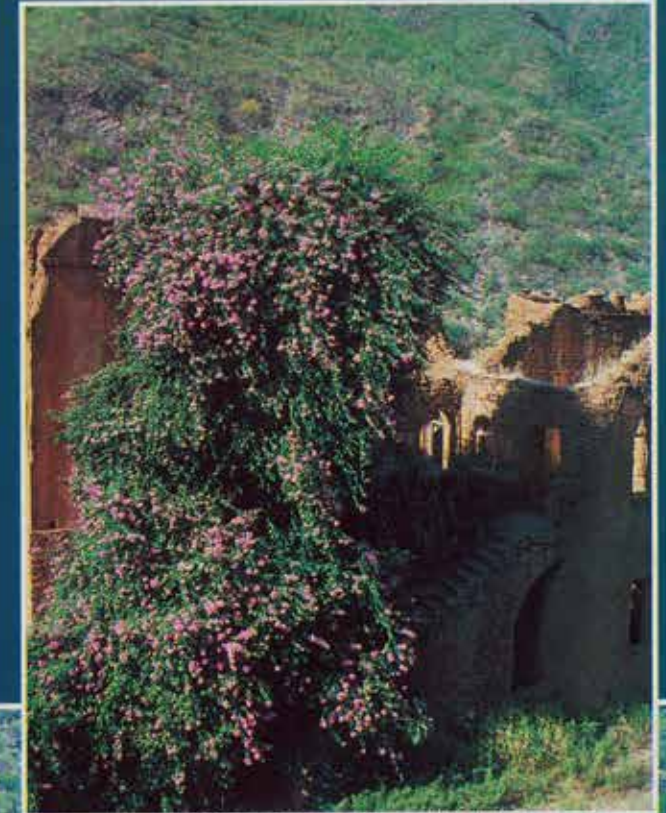
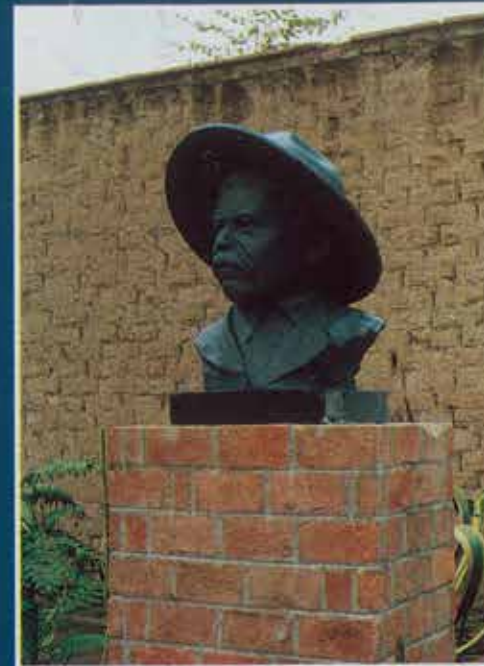
very few spoke any English.

The ride to Parral was on a new tarred road and had to be one of the most scenic and breathtaking in Mexico. It was in this country that Pancho Villa grew up as a young desperado on the run. His cunning and well honed abilities later served him well, helping him lead a force of 5,000 revolutionaries during the Mexican Revolution of 1915. We visited his grave in Parral and our 'Viva Villa' t-shirts caused quite a stir among the locals who still regard him as their hero. That night we visited the town square where the locals would wander around in their Sunday best and enjoy the music provided by the local musicians.

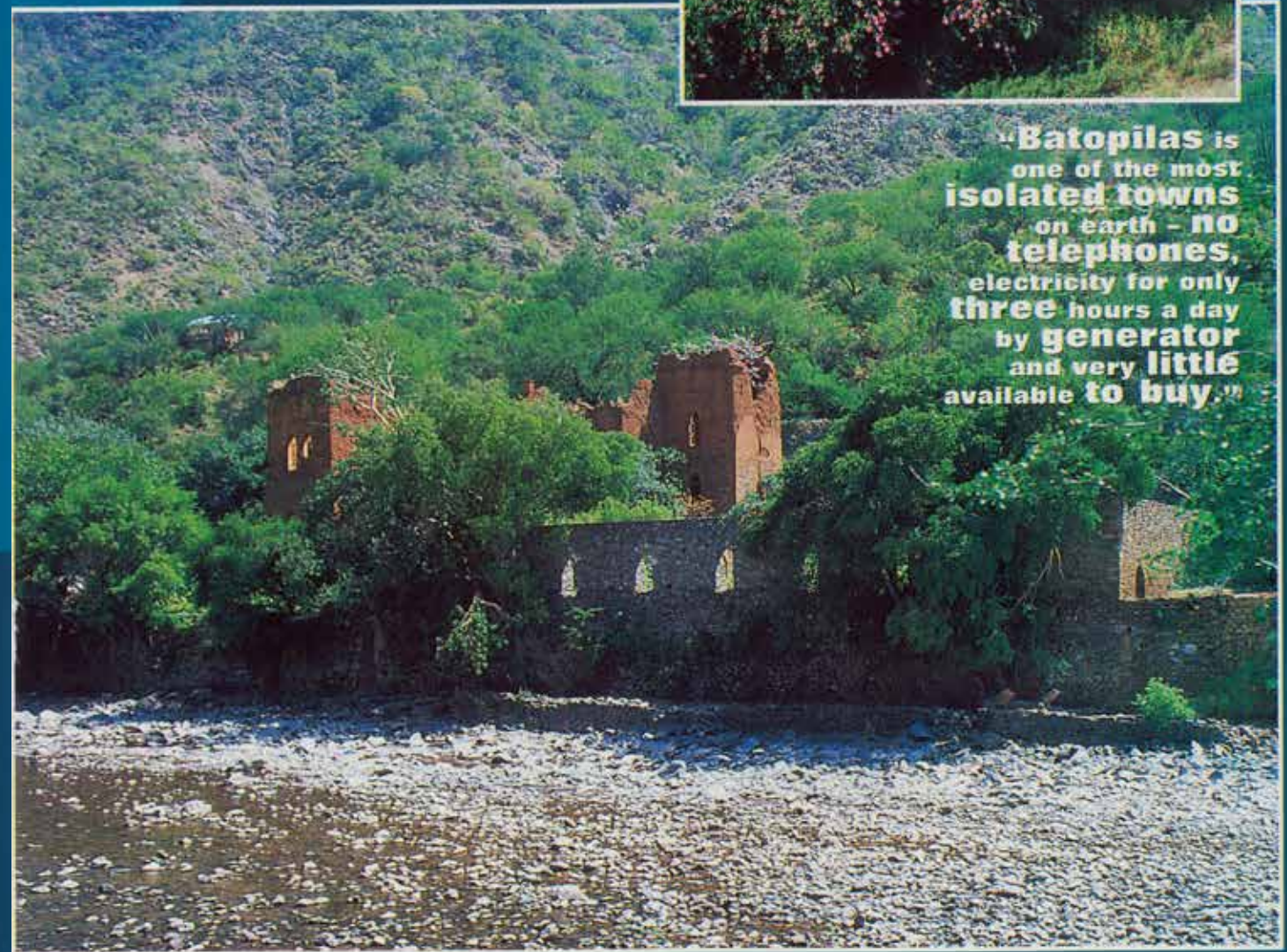
Another scenic ride took place the next day to Chihuahua where we had our first taste of civilisation, staying in a hotel in the centre of town and shopping for bargains in leather goods, shoes, arts and crafts, etc. We visited Pancho Villa's home, now a museum, which gave us an insight into his life and role in Mexican history. That night Skip hosted a night of revelry and fun in a fabulous restaurant built in an old liquor still.

A long, fairly flat and uneventful run up the blacktop to Juarez occupied the next day before an easy border crossing back to El Paso.

John Bennet liked the tour so much he bought the company. Well, not quite. He just became the Australian agent for Panch Villa Moto Tours. Just thought you'd like to know...



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Copper Canyon Tour (Mexico)

Getting there

■ This tour starts in El Paso, in the US. Yep, seen it on TV but how do you get there?

The easiest way is to fly via Los Angeles. There are connections from here to just about anywhere in North America where a tour might start. LAX fares are by far the cheapest, and Qantas has two flights there a day. Not to mention several other airlines; any convenient American airline might even fly you direct to Texas – to Dallas/Fort Worth – without the LAX stopover. Chances are Los Angeles flights will be cheaper, though; you may get a really good deal on something like the flight plus a couple of days at Disneyland.

Your other option for this kind of trip is to buy an Around-The-World ticket, in which case it doesn't much matter where you fly to initially. Hey, what about Seattle...

Pancho Villa Moto-Tours can be contacted in the person of John Bennett, 2/37 Lawson Street, Byron Bay NSW 2481. His telephone number is (066) 858 724, fax is (066) 858 570. The ten-day/nine-night tour described in this story costs US\$1195 (twin share) plus rental of the bike at US\$685 plus insurance. That includes airport pickup, the support vehicle, nine nights' accommodation, at least 12 meals, all the paperwork and entrance fees to various places. You travel off the beaten track, and away from tourists.

Formalities & health

■ You don't need a visa for Mexico, but you definitely do need one for the United States. Get it from the Consulate in Sydney, on the corner of Castlereagh Street and Martin Place. If you're not in Sydney, call them on 1800 805 924 and they'll tell you the procedure.

Health will be no problem by the sound of it, but travel (health) insurance, with repatriation, is still vital. Check your travel insurance details carefully; some policies specifically exclude motorcycling.

Climate

■ Autumn means cool temperatures in the high country and warm ones at the base of the canyon. It's unlikely you'll have rain.

Money

■ Pesos are Mexican legal tender, but I suspect you'll find US dollars a much more acceptable currency. Take some cash, some travellers' cheques and your credit cards. Mind you, there's little you'll need to buy on this tour, and shopping is not great except maybe in Chihuahua.

Accommodation & food

■ The food on the tour is pretty good, as you can tell from the story. It's simple, healthy cooking which can be a bit spicy; mainly meat, beans, rice and tortillas. Good Mexican beer (and there's much better than Corona, like, for instance, Bohemia) costs around 25 cents in the *cantinas*. It's all German-style lager (not surprisingly, since the breweries were all started by German immigrants). It's a good idea to ask for *una cerveza fria*, otherwise it might not be very cold.

Mechanical

■ The bikes are Kawasaki KLR650s, an ideal and comfortable on and off-road machine. The bikes are in good condition. Fuel is not included in the price of the tour, but it's very cheap. Mexico has a lot of oil.

Reading

■ I like Patrick Marnham's *So Far from God* (Penguin) but it's only got a little bit in it about Mexico. It's still a good introduction to Central America. Graham Greene and Aldous Huxley both wrote about Mexico, and the best history is probably *Sons Of The Shaking Earth* by Eric Wolf, but although I've seen it quoted I have never actually found a copy. You'll find the *Lonely Planet Travel Survival Kit for Mexico* very useful



on a trip like this. They also have a small, pocket-sized Latin American Spanish Phrasebook which would be a great investment. As always, the local people respond well to an attempt to speak their language.

And, to conclude

■ Off-road riding experience is vital for this tour. Bring good motorcycle gear, chosen for ease of movement and ventilation. A good helmet is vital, and armour is a good idea since off-road tumbles are distinctly possible. Bring a warm jacket for the high country. Oh, and don't forget good boots! Pillions are not recommended, but there may be space in the backup truck. **✶**

Martin Collins

If you would like a copy of the Lonely Planet Mexico Travel Survival Kit drop me, Martin Collins, a line here at Two Wheels. The best reason for wanting one gets it - that's worth \$27.95.

On the Road



FROM COPPER CANYON TO BLUE SKY MINING